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Lake County insists it won't take a back seat on Chicago area transportation issues in a growing suburban backlash against a plan to restructure the way bus, rail and road priorities are determined.

In a stump session expected to be duplicated in other counties, about 75 local political, business and civic leaders gathered Monday at a Gurnee motel to learn how and why suburban interests should be protected.

"It looks like change is coming," said Lake County Board Chairman Suzi Schmidt, who organized the forum. "I want Lake County and the other collar counties to be players in this."

Issues such as suburb-to-suburb and reverse commuting are of special interest as the population and Regional Transportation Authority tax dollars outside the city continue to climb, they say.

Leaders in Lake and other counties are mobilizing against recommendations by the Northeastern Illinois Regional Transportation Task Force in what would be the first significant change in public transit management since 1983.

The task force was organized to gather information on the way transportation programs for the six-county area work and make suggestions to Gov. Rod Blagojevich and the General Assembly on how the system could be improved.

Among the suggestions that have suburban officials on edge is changing the make-up of the Regional Transportation Authority board, in part by giving Blagojevich the authority to appoint the chairman who would assume the duties of chief executive officer.

Currently, that is a separate position and the chairman is chosen by board members. Critics say having a transportation czar appointed by the governor caters to political interests at the time, rather than a true regional consensus.

Suburban leaders also say the recommendation to restructure the board would shift control to Chicago.

The authority is the umbrella agency for PACE (suburban bus), Metra (suburban rail) and Chicago Transit Authority.

"My fear and the fears of some of the county board chairmen is the model of regional cooperation may be threatened," said Schmidt. She and colleagues have been meeting regularly on the issue and are united in their concerns, she added.

"How are we going to build a system that gets people from their house to the doctor or from Lake County to McHenry County?" asked McHenry County Board Chairman Mike Tryon, a non-voting task force member.

"We need to identify all the problems and how we're going to plan for them before we change the (authority's) structure."

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, also a non-voting member of the task force, said the authority's structure has forced bipartisan cooperation as Illinois fights for highly competitive federal transportation dollars.

Two-thirds of the 9 million Chicago-area residents live in the suburbs, he said, and areas outside the city should have a fair say in the process.

Jim LaBelle, deputy director of Chicago Metropolis 2020, a nonprofit business group that studies regional issues, cautioned the crowd Monday not to "go overboard."

Traffic congestion costs business \$4 billion annually, he said, noting there isn't a true suburban

transit system in place.

By 2030, commuters will spend 80 more hours per year stuck in traffic, he added.

"We need to look beyond the political arguments," he said.

"I think we have an opportunity to make real change - change that would be helpful to the suburbs."

Chances are the suburbs' voice will be heard. Kirk noted half of all voters live in the Chicago suburbs, which have become the "super heavyweight of Illinois politics."

Illinois Department of Transportation Secretary Tim Martin said Blagojevich understands the political mechanics.

"We need to work together," Martin said.

"He's (Blagojevich) not going to sign anything that's not bipartisan and does not balance the needs of everyone."